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Ex-Pentagon Aide's Role in Start of Contras Airlift Told

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WASHINGTON—A former high Pentagon official played a major role in setting up a secret air supply network for Nicaraguan *contras* and acted at the suggestion of a White House aide, U.S. officials and rebel sources said Monday.

Richard V. Secord, a retired Air Force major general and former deputy assistant secretary of defense, was "a key player" in Washington who helped set up a system of cargo planes based at Ilopango, El Salvador's main military air base, the sources said.

The supply network was revealed Oct. 6, the day after Nicaraguan troops shot down a C-123 cargo plane carrying guns and ammunition for the rebels, killing three crewmen and capturing one. The surviving crewman, Eugene Hasenfus of Marinette, Wis., went on trial in Managua on Monday on charges of violating Nicaraguan security laws.

Hasenfus has said that he believed the supply network, which used at least five cargo planes based at Ilopango, was a CIA project. But U.S. officials and rebel sources insist that the system was actually organized by private supporters of the *contras'* cause—some of whom acted at the suggestion of Reagan Administration aides.

A *contras* official said that Secord was introduced to rebel leaders by Lt. Col. Oliver North, a National Security Council aide who had overseen the CIA's former program of aid to the rebels. A U.S. official said he understood that to be true.

"Secord is a key player," the U.S. official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. "He is one of a very small group of people who really ran this thing. North was another."

"The general has helped us a great deal, ever since Congress cut off our money," a rebel source said, referring to the ban on U.S. government aid enacted in 1984. "He has helped us with money, he has helped us find munitions and he has helped us with the air supply."

Under the 1984 law, the Reagan Administration was prohibited from giving the rebels military aid or directly helping them obtain it from other sources. The Administration has denied any connection with the *contras'* military operation, except for giving general encouragement to private donors who wished to help.

Secord, who left the Pentagon in 1983 and now runs a military technology trading firm, did not respond to several requests for an interview. But on Sunday, he told the Long Island (N.Y.) newspaper *Newsday*: "I have talked to these people on a number of occasions. I have told them what I think they ought to do and how they ought to design their efforts, so you can say, I advised them, OK. . . . I've told them how to structure certain things I don't want to get into. But I'm not commanding the *contra* air force. If I were, I'd be down there."

In the past, Secord has denied any direct role in aiding the *contras*. But the telephone records of "safehouses" used by the *contras* supply network in San Salvador, and obtained by *Newsday* on Sunday, tied the retired general directly to the operation.

A Dozen Calls

The records, for July through September, showed a dozen calls to the Virginia offices of Secord's firm, Stanford Technology Trading Corp., and several more to a nearby residence through which reporters reached Secord on Sunday.

Secord told *Newsday* that he could not explain the calls.

"I run Stanford Technology," he said. "I never talked to any of them. I never heard of Hasenfus. I don't know anything about safehouses in El Salvador."

But *contras* sources and the U.S. official said that Secord helped set up the Salvador-based operation, which was directed on the ground by a former CIA operative, Felix

Rodriguez.

Several *contras* sources said that Secord had obtained funding for the operation from donors in Saudi Arabia. "This thing cost a lot of money, and it was coming from the Saudis," one source said.

The Saudi government has denied giving any aid to the rebels. Several sources said the donors were apparently Saudi private citizens.

Secord retired as the Pentagon's chief Middle East arms salesman in 1983 after successfully negotiating the sale of AWACS radar surveillance airplanes to Saudi Arabia—a project on which North also worked.

Congressmen's Intentions

The *contras* sources said that Secord also had helped them obtain weaponry in the past, but they refused to divulge any details.

In 1983, Secord testified that he had met several times over a 10-year period with Edwin P. Wilson, a former CIA official convicted of smuggling weapons and explosives to Libyan leader Moammar Kadafi. Justice Department officials said then that they believed Secord and Wilson had had financial dealings, but Secord was never accused of any crime.

Several members of Congress have announced that they intend to investigate the links between the Administration and the private aid network, but some have acknowledged that there is little clear evidence yet that the Administration broke the law.

Congress gave final approval last week to \$100-million in new assistance for the *contras*, including military aid, so the ban on Administration help to the rebels has expired.

Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams said Monday that he is confident Congress will find no wrongdoing in the Administration's conduct.

"If the whole picture of what we're doing is laid out, then you can see clearly that these kinds of private activities have nothing to do with the U.S. government," he said.

"None of us is engaged in any activity that is prohibited by Congress—none whatsoever," he said.